

Against the Grain

Volume 30 | Issue 2

Article 22

2018

Collecting to the Core — Great Plains Literature of Place

Melissa S. Jones

Lauinger Library, Georgetown University, Melissa.Jones@georgetown.edu

Anne Doherty

CHOICE/ACRL, adoherty@ala-choice.org

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/atg>



Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Jones, Melissa S. and Doherty, Anne (2018) "Collecting to the Core — Great Plains Literature of Place,"
Against the Grain: Vol. 30: Iss. 2, Article 22.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7771/2380-176X.8048>

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries.
Please contact epubs@purdue.edu for additional information.

Collecting to the Core — Great Plains Literature of Place

by **Melissa S. Jones** (English & Humanities Librarian, Lauinger Library, Georgetown University; American Literature Subject Editor, *Resources for College Libraries*) <melissa.jones@georgetown.edu>

Column Editor: **Anne Doherty** (*Resources for College Libraries* Project Editor, CHOICE/ACRL) <adoherty@ala-choice.org>

Column Editor's Note: The "Collecting to the Core" column highlights monographic works that are essential to the academic library within a particular discipline, inspired by the *Resources for College Libraries* bibliography (online at <http://www.rclweb.net>). In each essay, subject specialists introduce and explain the classic titles and topics that continue to remain relevant to the undergraduate curriculum and library collection. Disciplinary trends may shift, but some classics never go out of style. — AD

There are only two or three human stories, and they go on repeating themselves fiercely as if they had never happened before; like the larks in this country, that have been singing the same five notes over for thousands of years.¹
— **Willa Cather**, *O Pioneers!*

An oft-repeated story is that of humankind's civilizing efforts and struggles to break a land without being broken. This story is central to early twentieth-century reflections on late nineteenth-century pioneer experiences and resounds throughout the literature of place from the northern Great Plains. The novels of authors such as **O.E. (Ole Edvart) Rølvaag**, **Willa Cather**, and **Laura Ingalls Wilder** tease out the mythology of a discovered land, which serves both as a setting and, at times, an antagonist to the pioneers. While the emphasis on land is not unique to regional literature, it plays a crucial role in rooting readers in a particular space or place. In her lecture "Place in Fiction," **Eudora Welty** asserts that place — in comparison to other "angels" such as character, plot, symbolism, and feeling — "is one of the lesser angels that watch over the racing hand of fiction."² In the literature of the northern Great Plains, place rises above its typical lowly state to command a leading role along with the protagonists.

If we follow **Welty's** argument that place is a lesser angel of fiction, perhaps regional literature of the Plains is also a lesser angel of American literature, particularly when compared to the literature of the East or the South. Existing at the country's geographic midsection, the expansive Great Plains defy easy categorization. Defined by contradictions, the plains are both urban and rural, agricultural and industrial, traditional and progressive. They extend as far south as west Texas and as far north as the heart of Canada, pushing against the bounds of the Midwest and the Mountain States. It is the region that is not one. The greatest unifying factor is perhaps the land itself, which shapes both the region's culture and its literature. The land emanates

throughout Great Plains literature of the early twentieth century. This essay identifies literary works and scholarship that help undergraduates appreciate the import of place for this diverse literary region.

O.E. Rølvaag captures the mythology of the Great Plains in his epic *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie*.³ Originally published in Norwegian as two volumes in 1924 and 1925, *Giants in the Earth* was translated into English in 1927 and found immediate success. A chronicle of Norwegian Americans' experiences in helping settle Dakota Territory in the 1870s, the novel depicts pioneers' struggles to break the land that is at once breaking them. As **Charles R. Walker** noted in his review, "The book records the partial conquest of the American prairie by the pioneer, and the partial conquest of the pioneer's heart and mind by the prairie."⁴ The essence of **Rølvaag's** novel is a conflict over faith and culture: what could be gained and what might be lost on a human scale in the quest to settle an untamable land? Main characters **Per Hansa** and his wife **Beret** exemplify the tension between hope and despair. Across the endless expanse of prairie grass, unbroken by trees, landforms, or manmade edifices, **Per Hansa's** eyes are fixed west, seeing only the promise of possibility and a prosperous future. Facing that same landscape, **Beret** withers into herself, overwhelmed by the emptiness and afraid of how it might strip her family of faith and civilization. Their struggle illustrates dueling mythologies that posit the Plains as being both a blank canvas on which to write a bolder, brighter future and alternately an empty wasteland that cannot possibly sustain society. Ultimately, the Plains are part of their undoing.

If **Per Hansa** exemplifies the pioneer spirit in both bravado and folly, the protagonists of **Willa Cather's** *O Pioneers!* and *My Antonia* present an alternative but no less stalwart vision of the pioneer experience. In **Cather's** novels, immigrants **Alexandra Bergson** and **Antonia Shimerda** envision a cultivated land and display great steadfastness in settling the Nebraska prairie. Written in 1913, *O Pioneers!* follows **Alexandra Bergson** as she leads her family to break in the land following her father's death.⁵ The novel wrestles with themes of civilization,

freedom, and rootedness, all of which are underscored by the land. It is **Alexandra**, not her brothers, whose shrewd insights transform the vast, unbreakable prairie into livable farmland, although she attributes the settling of the prairie to the land itself: "The land did it. It had its little joke. It pretended to be poor because nobody knew how to work it right; and then, all at once, it worked itself. It woke up out of its sleep and stretched itself, and it was so big, so rich, that we suddenly found we were rich, just from sitting still."⁶ The land is a living, acting agent, but in her commitment to seeing the prairie and her family prosper, **Alexandra** finds herself bound to the land and her dependent family.

My Antonia, published five years later in 1918, similarly paints **Antonia**, an immigrant from Bohemia, as tied to and representative of the land. Told through the perspective of **Jim Burden**, the novel traces the interwoven stories of **Jim's** and **Antonia's** lives. For **Jim**, **Antonia** typifies "the country, the conditions, the whole adventure of our childhood."⁷ She symbolizes the very land she inhabits, and both she and the land create a sense of homecoming and belonging throughout the novel. **Cather** also employs **Jim's** recollections of **Antonia** and their coming of age on the Nebraska prairie to explore the enormity and permanence of the land together with the insignificance and impermanence of the settlers. Like the image of the plow set against the sunset — at first magnified and "heroic in size, a picture writing on the sun" and soon forgotten, "sunk back to its own littleness somewhere on the prairie" — the land encapsulates the human drama of *My Antonia*.⁸

Often relegated to the children's literature shelves, **Laura Ingalls Wilder's** semi-autobiographical *Little House on the Prairie* series has received renewed interest by scholars in recent decades.⁹ Originally published between 1932 and 1943, the nine-book series follows the **Ingalls** family from their home in Wisconsin (*Little House in the Big Woods*) to the Kansas prairie (*Little House on the Prairie*) and then from Walnut Grove, Minnesota (*On the Banks of Plum Creek*) to De Smet, South Dakota (*By the Shores of Silver Lake*, *The Long Winter*, *Little Town on the Prairie*, *These Happy Golden Years*, and

continued on page 41



the posthumously published *The First Four Years*).¹⁰ While the series has problematic aspects — namely its uncritical celebration of Manifest Destiny and overall depictions of Native Americans — it also is emblematic of its time and serves as a classic example of pioneers' westward migration in the late nineteenth century. The series is characterized by adventure and sweeping storytelling while depicting the real dangers and challenges faced by pioneers, echoing those described in **Rølvaag's** work: unending blizzards, plagues of locusts, starvation, loneliness, illness, and death. Throughout, the family repeatedly uproots and follows the siren call of the West, which entices **Charles Ingalls** with the promise of freedom, a land rich in resources, and opportunities not provided by the established East. In spite of the challenges, the push westward over an endless sea of grass and under an expansive dome of sky is not towards an ending, but the promise of new beginnings.

The following scholarly sources and reference works help contextualize these novels. Currently available in two volumes, the *Dictionary of Midwestern Literature* is an essential resource for studying midwestern literature, including that of the northern Great Plains.¹¹ Volume one comprises roughly four-hundred biographical essays on authors who had significant connections to and writings about the Midwest. Volume two includes essays on major midwestern literary texts, geography and specific regional places, major population groups, cultural and historical developments, social change and movements, literary genres, and literary periodicals, among other topics. These essays provide undergraduates with critical background information along with bibliographies and further readings. A third volume is planned for the set.

Although not specific to the Great Plains or the Midwest, **Charles L. Crow's** *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America* is useful for understanding the "rich heritage" of American regional literature and shows the "scope and history of regional literatures, and to understand their importance, as revealed by several theoretical approaches."¹² The book's thirty-one essays are arranged in three broad sections: "History and Theory of Regionalism in the United States," "Mapping Regions," and "Some Regionalist Masters." While not all essays are germane to the study of Plains literature, particular essays such as "Contemporary Regionalism," "The Cultural Work of American Regionalism," "The Great Plains," and "**Willa Cather's** Glittering Regions" are useful introductions to studying regional literature in general and Great Plains literature in particular.

Edited by **Virginia Faulkner** and **Fredrick C. Luebke**, the chapters in *Vision and Refuge: Essays on the Literature of the Great Plains* make the case for "the importance of Great Plains literature and how it reflects the culture of the people who settled the region."¹³ The volume is divided into three sections that address the perspectives of three groups across time: the Teton Sioux, the region's original inhabitants; nineteenth-century European American immigrants; and African Americans and Chicanos in the late twentieth century. The second part of the book is the most substantive and relevant to the novels discussed in this essay. They cover topics such as materialism and mysticism, agrarians and frontiersmen, and Scandinavian-American literature along with essays on particular authors such as **Rølvaag** and **Cather**.

Ronald Weber's *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing* focuses on the brief time in the early twentieth century when midwestern literature, including that of the Northern Plains, came to the forefront of American literature.¹⁴ **Weber** explores the seeming contradictions that define and shape the Midwest — the rural and the urban, optimism and pessimism, the particularly regional and the universally American — as he examines the works of authors such as **Hamlin Garland**, **Theodore Dreiser**, **Edgar Lee Masters**, **Carl Sandburg**, **Sherwood Anderson**, **Sinclair Lewis**, **Cather**, and **Rølvaag**. While **Weber's** focus is broader than the Plains, his critique of midwestern literature is highly relevant to understanding Plains literature.

As a final work of criticism to consider, **Diane Quantic's** *The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction* grapples with "the physical reality and the psychological significance of open space."¹⁵ She explores the mythology of westward expansion through several key concepts — land, society, myth, and reality — in the creative and autobiographical works of writers such as **Washington Irving**, **Wright Morris**, **Mari Sandoz**, **Wallace Stegner**, **Cather**, **Rølvaag**, and **Wilder**. **Quantic** examines how these authors "depict the interrelated influences of the various westering myths, the land itself, and the establishment of society" and ultimately demonstrates how these converge to create a distinct body of literature.¹⁶

While this essay does not comprehensively survey all northern Great Plains literature of place, it provides a starting point for undergraduates seeking to understand this region's literature. These novels, in particular, are at the heart of not only the mythology of the Plains but also the mythology of western expansion and, in many ways, the mythology of America itself. The authors' compelling depictions of the hope and despair, the opportunity and folly, and the prairie and its pioneers have endured and should provide fruitful study for undergraduates for years to come. 🌾

Endnotes

1. **Cather, Willa.** *Early Novels and Stories: The Troll Garden, O Pioneers!, The Song of the Lark, My Antonia, One of Ours.* New York: Library of America, 1987, 196.*
2. **Welty, Eudora.** "Place in Fiction." *The Eye of the Story: Selected Essays and Reviews.* New York: Random House, 1978, 116.
3. **Rølvaag, O.E.** *Giants in the Earth: A Saga of the Prairie.* New York: HarperCollins, 1999.*
4. **Walker, Charles R.** "A European-American Genius." *The Independent* 119, no. 4023 (July 9, 1927): 44.
5. **Cather, Early Novels and Stories.**
6. **Cather, Early Novels and Stories**, 194.
7. **Cather, Early Novels and Stories**, 712.
8. **Cather, Early Novels and Stories**, 866.
9. **Wilder, Laura Ingalls.** *The Little House Books.* Edited by **Caroline Fraser**. 2 vols. New York: Library of America, 2012.*
10. The series also includes the book *Farmer Boy*, which is excluded from this essay as it is set in upstate New York.
11. **Greasley, Philip A., ed.** *Dictionary of Midwestern Literature.* 2 vols. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001-2016.*
12. **Crow, Charles L., ed.** *A Companion to the Regional Literatures of America.* Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2003.*
13. **Faulkner, Virginia, and Frederick C. Luebke, eds.** *Vision and Refuge: Essays on the Literature of the Great Plains.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1982.*
14. **Weber, Ronald.** *The Midwestern Ascendancy in American Writing.* Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.*
15. **Quantic, Diane Dufva.** *The Nature of the Place: A Study of Great Plains Fiction.* Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995.*
16. **Quantic, The Nature of the Place**, xx.

Editor's note: An asterisk () denotes a title selected for *Resources for College Libraries*.